

Development of Railways in South Arcot District: Political, Social and Economic Changes (c. 1856-1947)

Dr. V. PALANICHAMY *

Assistant Professor
Department of History,
Arignar Anna Government Arts College,
Musiri-621 211, Tamilnadu, India.

Introduction

Railways played vital role in the growth of modern industry in colonial India. It is helpful throughout the history of human development in connection with to unique physical integration of people who were lived in different parts of India with cultural diversity. Railway development have been facilitates the satisfaction of human needs; it assists alike the production, consumption, exchange and distribution of wealth.¹ In colonial context railway is one of the legacies of the British rule in India, has not only cause of marked increase of rapid communication within our country, but also brought political, social and economic changes of the people. Dan Boart and Latika Chaudhary² are points out that in terms of the economy; railways played a significant role in integrating markets and increasing trade. Domestic and international economic trends shaped the pace of railway construction and the demand for the important traffic flows to the ports. In addition that in term of politics, railways shaped the finances of the colonial government and native states. Laxman D. Satya³ clearly stated that the railways started for commercial and military purpose. The main objectives in the minds of the authorities in colonial India, were chiefly political and commercial. The author has raised three basic questions regarding development of railways in India, they are: 1) whether the colonial masters were gradually developed railways in India for the their own benefit of political economy nor for the development of indigenous people?, 2) The British administrators were truly developed Indian economy for the welfare of India?, and 3) What was the condition of indigenous industry after the introduction of railways?. These questions are clarified and analyzed by author based on primary sources like the railway administration reports, report on Railway Board, Proceedings of Board of Revenues and Minutes of select committee of East India Railway and also utilized some secondary source materials.

* This paper was presented in the 80th Session of the Indian History Congress at Kannur University, Kannur, Kerala from 28th-30th December 2019.

Lord Dalhousie's famous Railway Minute dated 20 April 1853 was the "textbook" for future railway projects in India. It laid down the road directions in which the construction, management and finance of railways was to be undertaken. He recommended the replacement of the policy of experimental lines by a policy of constructing trunk lines connecting the interior of each of the three presidencies with principal port. Dalhousie suggested that the construction of railways should be turned over to private companies working under government supervision and control and guaranteed a rate of return on capital.⁴

South Indian Railway

Before the advent of railways, most of the villages in this region varying with social customs, languages, geographical environment and economy, produced only those food materials which were required for local consumption. Without railway transport it was extremely difficult to transport agricultural produce to distance places.⁵ Therefore, the need for construction of railways provided an excellent opportunity to export British surplus capital. In this connection, in the Madras Presidency consisted of a number of smaller railway systems administered by the erstwhile Madras Railway Company, Southern-Mahratta Railway, South Indian Railway etc.⁶ The South Indian Railway was opened first railway line from Madras to Arokonam in 1856.⁷ This company was constituted in 1857 with view to construct lines in the extreme south in India, from Nagapattinam to Tiruchirappalli, with extensions towards the north to meet the Madras Railway at Erode and to the south to Madurai and Thoothukudi (Tuticorin).⁸ Railway line contract for the first section was entered in September 1858.⁹ It was proposed railway on this line to construct by government directly. But the proposal was dropped as the estimated cost was considered to be too high. But it was constructed that line on the standard gauge by the South Indian Railway then the system was converted into metre guage.¹⁰

From 1856 to 1947, Railway lines were connected with main eastern ports of Vizagapattinam, Cocanada, Masulipattinam, Madras, Pondicherry (French), Cuddalore, Nagapattinam, Thoothukudi, and Dhanshkodi.¹¹ Later, it has been serving the State of Tamilnadu, Kerala, a major portion of Karnataka, a small portion of Andhra Pradesh and the Union territory of Pondicherry, traverses over 6,785 kilometers. Private British companies with the strong backing of the government of India not only built railways but

also owned them. Private companies would build and operate their respective lines in different regions of the sub-continent with a guaranteed 5 per cent return on their stockholders' investment assured by the Indian revenues of the territory.¹²

Development of Railways in South Arcot district

South Arcot was a part of Madras presidency under colonial rule at present Villuppuram, Cuddalore and Kallakurichi districts of Tamilnadu. Cuddalore was a capital city of South Arcot ditrict is mentioned our study period. The South Indian Railway (a meter gauge line) had very large mileage in Tamilnadu, the main line ran 710 kilometers north to southward from Madras to Tuticorin via Saidapet, St. Thomas' Mount, Pallavaram, Chingleput, and Madurandakam taluks of Chingleput district and it entered at Olakkur in Tindivanam taluk of South Arcot district.¹³ The main line ran within the district of South Arcot for a distance of 140 km. from north to south through Tindivanam, Villupuram, Panruti and then turns to east to the port of Cuddalore, and thereafter runs further south to Porto Novo, Chidambaram and over the Kollidam bridge into Tanjore district.¹⁴ The branch line run east to west towards Tirukkovilur, Tiruvannamalai to Vellore. The South Indian Railway Company was laid railway line in 1874 under their 5 per cent guarantee. It was converted to metre gauge in July 1878.¹⁵ The main line from Madras to Tindivanam was opened in September 1876, from Tindivanam to Cuddalore Old Town in January 1877, from Cuddalore Old Town to Porto Novo in 1877, from Porto Novo to Chidambaram in October 1878, and from Chidambaram to Kollidam (Coleroon in English) on the Thanjavur border in July 1879.¹⁶ The branch line ran east to west from Villupuram to Vellore was constructed in two stages that from Villupuram through Tirukkoyilur to Tiruvannamalai have been opened in November 1890 for a distance of 48 kilometers, and Tiruvannamalai through Polur, Arni to Vellore, a distance of 96 kilometers. It was opened in March 1891.¹⁷ A branch line from Villupuram to Pondicherry ran west to eastward via Valavanur and Villiyanur for a distance of 51 kilometers in length, maintained communication with Madras, which was opened in December 1879 connected the French Settlement of Pondicherry.¹⁸

In the early twentieth century the railway line was further extended from Villupuram to Ulundurpettai in 1927, in the next year (1928) from Cuddalore to Vriddhachalam railway line was extended via Neively. From Ulundurpettai to Tiruchirappalli railway line was constructed in 1928, it connected with Viruddhachalam. Finally, the railway line was further extended from Viruddhachalam to Salem town (133 km), it was opened on 3rd February 1931, which is make easy traffic to Cuddalore port.¹⁹

Thus, the hinterland of Cuddalore was well connected by railways. The construction of bridges, roads and railways contributed to the development of sugar industries established at Nellikuppam between 1842 and 1855. By the first half of the 20th centuries several major railway lines were constructed by the British and linked with important towns of South Arcot at enormous cost. It made the movement of people and goods easier and faster for a cheaper price.

Development of Urbanization

South Arcot had poor communication until mid 19th century. It was naturally affected the development of agriculture, industries and commerce. In spite of a very attractive British market for cotton, for example adequate supplies could not be shipped from port of Cuddalore and port of Madras.²⁰ The urban growth of South Arcot brought about social and economic changes rapidly due to the introduction of railway communication. Urbanization refers to city formation (industries, migration villages, transport facilities etc). In the early modern period the expansion of long distance of trade and mercantile capitalism stimulate the growth of major European cities. The commercial transformation developed internal as well as external trading activities in this region particularly in coastal towns. Agricultural production was brought to the Cuddalore from where it was exported to other European colonies. Market, signifying internal trade, flourished within the district and other parts of South India as well as India. The establishment and development of market would have been linked with the process of urbanization of towns. Merchants in the open markets had to pay tax in cash.²¹ There was remarkable development of organized rural and urban markets both temporary and permanent, their periodicity varying from daily, weekly and cyclic. Jeyaseela Stephen²² stated that markets were held on particular days of the week at different places. For example Wednesday was market day in Tindivanam, the market being held at a hamlet called Gidangal, which now is a suburb of Tindivanam town. Senji was conducted market on Friday in every week; it continuous even today at Chettipalayam.²³ There was a weekly market area in Tiruppapuliur was called *Sandaitope*. Kanniah²⁴ has mentioned the increase of population and the extension of Cuddalore town necessitated the formation of regular markets. The income from the market was equally divided among them through an agreement. The net income from the market amounted to Rs. 400-2-0 in the year 1891.²⁵

The introduction of Railways in this region contributed to the emergence of a countrywide network of urban places.²⁶ The Colonial government had expanded railways

communication within the district, thereby linking important commercial centres to main ports of Cuddalore, Porto Novo and Pondicherry (a French settlement) for exportation of commercial product. Ramachandran²⁷ points out that the railway contribution in no small measure to the enlargement of trade and the introduction of modern industry and thus indirectly helped the process of urbanization. The most direct contribution of the railways to the growth of the existing towns was railway station. The railway station became a focal point of the town, rivaled only by the main market centre. The towns began grow in the direction of the railway station and even the main market began to shift towards this area. The result was haphazard urban growth from the town centre towards the railway station. By the end of the 19th century, England had emerged as a major industrial economy of the world and India was the main market for British goods.²⁸ Therefore India's traditional urban centres, which depended on the export of its industrial products, declined rapidly as a consequence.²⁹ We find that the decline of the urban centres of the pre-British period was due to the introduction of the network of railroads in South Arcot, starting from 1876. Since 1853, the rail network had been fully developed and covered all parts of India. These extensions were of immense service during the acute famine of 1876-1878.³⁰ Protection against famines was one of the main causes for railway extension in India.

Impact of Railways

The political impact of railway development in the 19th century was enormous. The network of easy communications converted this region from mere geographical expression to a well-knit and consolidated political unit. The efficiency of the army and the civil administration on which British authority rested increased. Economically and socially the impact was even more fundamental.³¹ The impact of railways was felt in all sectors of the Indian economy. Both people and cargo made an extensive use of the railways. Vera Anstey, the distinguished British authority on economic development of India, argues that the construction of railways in India undoubtedly extended and revolutionized trade both internal and external.³² Karl Marx observed that the railway system in India would become "truly the forerunners of modern industry".³³ It was believed that railways would assist the economic development of India and help the import and distribution of manufactures and the collection and export of raw materials and agricultural produce. Commercialisation of agriculture brought far-reaching changes in this region. As preference for cash crops on the part of the cultivators rose, demands for land also rose greatly. This was created land market and brought about higher land

price, rent and taxes. Railways induce the farms and cultivators to improve and increase their production. The increase products could be easily transported to the European markets as well as manufacturing industries with cheap and low rate of cost.³⁴

The expansion of commercial crops for exportation was dynamic process which increasingly drew the subsistence sector into the commercial or monetary sector and converted the peasant into market-oriented. It is true that railways played a vital role in the growth of modern industry. But, in terms of employment, this growth was extremely limited. By the 1880s Britain had become both India's largest consumer and the source of three-quarters of the subcontinent's imports. The agricultural sector of the economy was deeply affected by the widening of markets. For the first time, price in India was susceptible to any significant shift in world prices. Indian agriculture became part to the world trade cycle. As part of this linkage, farmers' decisions regarding plantation of crops were affected by the prices set in international markets and reduced transport costs induced Indian farmers to cultivate commercial crops or non-food crops such as cotton, sugar, groundnuts, indigo, tobacco and oil seeds etc. Thus agriculture began to become commercialized.

Commercialization brought far-reaching changes to rural areas. Greater specialization and the opportunity to export agricultural commodities raised the value of farm output in this region with. This led to a greater demand for land which in turn stimulated sales of land and brought about higher land prices, rents, and taxes. The growth of exports also led to an increased flow of income into rural areas in this region. Which classes gained from this flow of income depended on local conditions. Large landowners reaped advantages both from the sale of their surpluses and from their capacity to make loans, and those small landowners whose holdings were large enough to provide surplus acreage also benefited. Another group which realized gains was that of the landless labourers in regions of low population density, such as Cuddalore, Chidambaram, and Tindivanam taluks, where the real wages rose as farmers expanded acreage in intensive crop.³⁵

Agriculture was relatively favoured by railway rates. In contrast to modern industry which had to bring in energy and raw materials, agriculture's input were produced locally. The relative abundance of good land and cheap labour kept production costs low, and the relatively inexpensive charges for sea freight allowed agriculture to compete in overseas markets as long as the railway rates to ports remained advantageous. That agriculture made use of these rates is indicated by the composition of railway freight

revenues.³⁶ A large portion of the grain and other agricultural commodities that were exported overseas was surplus, i.e. it was what remained after local needs were met. Price changes in international markets and lower transport rates did induce some farmers to alter their cropping patterns. Farmers were slow to respond.³⁷ The railways helped the indigenous people in this region in various ways, on the other hand demerits like deforestation of some areas through cutting the trees for making the wooden sleeper and the construction of rail road were also resulted. By the transport of raw materials, coal, and labour, etc. railways had stimulated the growth of large scale enterprise, the process of specialization in production and the steady industrial transformation of the country. The effects of railway expansion were the destruction of local indigenous industries.

Conclusion

It is important to note that the expansion of railways helped in the direction of increase in the drain of wealth from the commencement of railways in this region as well as whole India with foreign capital and administered by foreign employees. Such arrangements involved remittance of money in the form of interest and profit and other variety of payments. Thus, the potential benefits of railways were far from actual benefits due to increased drain of wealth. The overall result of colonial rule was developed in this region into modern industrial economy. People of South Arcot had become an exporter of raw materials and foodstuffs and an importer of manufactures. However, the indigenous handloom industries were declined gradually in this district due to increase of modern textile mills in India. Therefore, the regional economy had become backward and underdeveloped in the contemporary context. The native people subjected to increasing impoverishment over the period. Some of them migrated to urban cities for their livelihood.

References

1. Ramswarup D. Tiwari, *Railways in Modern India*, New Book Co., Bombay, 1941, p.1.
2. Dan Bogart and Latika Chaudhary, "Railways in Colonial India: An Economic Achievement?", August, 2011, p.1.
3. Laxman D. Satya, "British Imperial Railways in Nineteenth Century South Asia", *Economic & Political Weekly*, November 22, 2008, p.69.
4. Vinod Dubey, 'Railway' ed., in *Economic History of India, 1857-1956* by V.B. Singh, Allied Publishers Private Limited, New Delhi, reprint, 1983, pp.325-26.
5. J. Johnson, *The Economics of Indian Rail Transport*, Bombay, 1963, p.92.
6. Truman C. Bigham and J.D. Roberts, *Transportation*, New York, 1952, p.11.
7. Vera Anstey, *The Economic Development of India*, Longman, London, New Impression, 1957, p.131; Dan Boart and Latika Chaudhry, *Railways in Colonial India: An Economic Achievement?*, August 2011, p.2.
8. Nalinaksha Sanyal, *Development of Indian Railways*, University of Calcutta, 1930, pp.29.
9. Juland Danvers, Report on Indian Railways, 1859.
10. Nalinaksha Sanyal, *op.cit.*, pp.29-30.
11. Vera Anstey, *op.cit.*, p.149.
12. Laxman D Satya, *op.cit.*
13. Report by the Railway Board on Indian Railways for 1932-33, Vol.I, New Delhi, 1934, p.70; C.S. Crole, *The Chingleput, Late Madras district Manual*, The Lawrence Asylum Press, Madras, 1879, p.21.
14. Board of Revenue, dated 23 December 1886, No.2777, p.14; G.O.No.1084 (Railway), dated 2nd October 1899; W. Francis, *Madras District Gazetteer-South Arcot*, Government Press, Madras, 1905, pp.174-175.
15. G.S. Khosla, *A History of Indian Railways*, Ministry of Railways, New Delhi, 1988, p.73.
16. B.S. Baliga, *Madras District Gazetteers-South Arcot*, Madras, 1962, p.293.
17. Board of Revenue, dated 21st December 1883, No.3883; G.O. No. 1084, Railway, dated 2nd October, 1899.
18. Board of Revenue, dated 25 November 1880, No.438, p.8287.
19. Report by the Railway Board on Indian Railways for 1930-31, vol.I, Calcutta, 1932, p.29 and B.S. Baliga, *op.cit.*, p.293.
20. J. Johnson, *The Economics of Indian Rail Transport*, Allied Publisher Pvt. Ltd, Bombay, 1963, p.120.
21. S.Jeyaseela Stephen, *The Coromandel Coast and its Hinterland: Society, Economy and Political System A.D. 1500-1600*, Delhi, 1997, p.95.
22. Ibid.
23. Ibid.

24. Kanniah, *Cuddalore on the Coromandel Coast under the English 1690-1939-A Study in Urbanization*, IRISH, Tellicherry, 2002, p.10.
25. G.O.16 September 1891, No.1510, M. Local and Municipal.p.1.
26. Henriette Bugge, *Mission and Tamil Society: Social and Religious Change in South India 1840-1900* (Richmond: Curzon Press, 1994), p.32.
27. R. Ramachandran, *Urbanization and Urban System in India*, Oxford University Press, Thirteenth Impression, New Delhi, 2004, p.67.
28. Ibid.
29. Ibid., p.61.
30. Nalinaksha Sanyal., *op.cit.*, p.114.
31. Vinod Dubey, *op.cit.*, p.335.
32. Vera Anstey, *op.cit.* p.151.
33. Karl Marx, Article on India, Bombay, 1943, pp.70.
34. John M. Hurd, 'Irrigation and Railways: Railways', in Dharma Kumar (ed.), *The Cambridge Economic History of India 1757-2003*, Vol.2, Orient Longman, Reprint, New Delhi, 2005), pp.746-47.
35. Henriette Bugge, *op.cit.*, p.150.
36. John M. Hurd., *op.cit.*, p.758 .
37. For farmers' lack of responsiveness to price changes before 1900. See also Michelle Bure McAlpin, "Railroads, Price, and Peasant Rationality: India 1860-1900," *Journal of Economic History* (September 1974), vol.34, No.3, pp.663-669; see also Dharma Kumar, (ed.), *The Cambridge Economic History*, vol. 2, c.1757-c.1970, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge, reprinted 1989, p.759-760.